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U.S. Intelligence Wasn't Very Smart

President Carter's chewing-out of top intelligence officials, disclosed last week, is a pointed reminder that the United States intelligence apparatus has gotten no better at anticipating political developments abroad. Perhaps it has gotten no worse. But that's small comfort to the men who received the frosty hand-written notes.

Recently the Administration has been embarrassed by the Central Intelligence Agency's failure to anticipate revolt in Iran (despite warnings by Israeli agents), upheaval in Afghanistan (despite warnings by Iranian agents) and military adventures by Rhodesia. But these failures may be no more striking than the failure to predict the Arab oil embargo of 1973 — foreseen by oil-industry publications available to anyone who could read.

The apparent difficulty, now as then, is threefold. In concentrating on technology, such as electronic interception, United States intelligence has lost a "feel" for human currents. It has been slow to recognize that any number of strategic nations, not just the Soviet Union and China, bear close watching. It has not entirely overcome the temptation to make reports fit the preconceived views of superiors.

Intelligence leadership has been reshaped under Adm. Stansfield Turner, Mr. Carter's prime target. The harder part will be reallocating personnel and priorities in the field.